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THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL FAILURE.

THERE is probably not one of those various social contrivances, political engines, or modes of common action called institutions which are regarded as characteristic of the United States, if not peculiar to them, in which the people of this country have placed more confidence, or felt greater pride, than its public-school system. There is not one of them so unworthy of either confidence or pride; not one which has failed so completely to accomplish the end for which it was established. And the case is worse than that of mere failure; for the result has been deplorable, and threatens to be disastrous.

To those who have not thought upon this subject, or who have thought upon it vaguely, and without careful and considerate observation of all the facts which bear upon it, this assertion will savor strongly of temerity and folly. The belief that education—meaning thereby the acquiring of such knowledge as can be got in schools and from books—is in itself elevating and purifying, and is the most potent agency in the formation of good men and good citizens, is so general and so plausible, that it has been assumed as an axiom in that which, for reasons that do not yet quite clearly appear, has come to be called “social science.” If this assumed axiom were well founded, if it were really true that book-learning and thrift, decency of life, and good citizenship, are so directly connected that they must always be found together, it need hardly be said that this sort of education would be of the first necessity in every wisely constructed and well-ordered society, and would be of supreme necessity in a country in which every man who lives outside of prison walls has a voice in the government. Hence, the assumption on this point being what it is and has been for many generations, it would be strange indeed if public education had not been a subject of grave consideration early in the short history of the United States,

and if it had not been amply provided for by legislation. The provision was early made ; and public education at public cost has been so general here, and has been developed into a system so vast and so complete, that a better opportunity for testing its worth could not be hoped for. The conditions, too, under which this system has been in operation are singularly favorable. The wealth of the country, its vast expanse of uncultivated, unoccupied land, a homestead in which can be acquired at an almost nominal price, the general intelligence of the people, their freedom from burdensome taxation, the absence of privileged classes and of an established religion supported by the state, make its people one upon which education, according to the assumed theory, should have the happiest, the most benign effects. But, however great may be the intrinsic value of education as a formative social agency, the effect of that which is afforded by our public-school system has proved in every way unsatisfactory and worse than unsatisfactory.

That the system is of New England origin need hardly be said. It is a development of the New England common school, from which it has been gradually evolved under gradually accumulating influences, some of which were pure and philanthropic, but other some of which were corrupt and self-seeking. The former may be called social ; the latter political—using the word in that narrow and derogatory sense which it has unhappily acquired in our discussions of public affairs. In Massachusetts, in the year 1647, and in Connecticut only three years later, it was enacted that every township of fifty householders should appoint a person within their town to teach all children that should resort to him to write and read, whose wages should be paid by either the parents or the masters of such children, or by the inhabitants in general ; and it was also ordered that, in every town of one hundred families, there should be a grammar-school set up, the masters of which should be able to fit youths for the university ; a grammar-school being then a school for instruction in the Latin language ; English grammar and the teaching of it to English-speaking children remaining yet unimagined, and to men of that time almost unimaginable. This system of compulsory support of common schools and grammar-schools spread itself over all New England and throughout those Northern and Western States which were more or less under New England influence.

The history of public education in the city of New York is of such importance as to merit special although brief consideration.

The act establishing common schools in the State of New York was passed in 1812. Before that time money was expended by the State for the encouragement and support of schools ; but there was no public-school system. The law of 1812 applied to towns and villages, but not to chartered cities, with two or three specified exceptions. New York was not one of these. Public education in that city was in the hands of the Public-School Society, a voluntary association, chartered, and in its standing and motives something like the New York City Hospital. I have not been able, in the time that I could give to this subject, to find the act incorporating this benevolent society ; but I find so early as the year 1807 an act for its benefit, of which the preamble is as follows :

Whereas, The trustees of the Society for establishing a Free School in the City of New York, for the education of such poor children as do not belong to or are not provided for by any religious society, have by their memorial solicited the aid of the Legislature ; and whereas, their plan of extending the benefits of education to poor children, and the excellent mode of instruction adopted by them, are largely deserving the encouragement of government : therefore," etc.

This makes the original purpose of common-school education in the city of New York sufficiently clear. It was intended for poor children whose education was not provided for by any religious society. But, in fact, its benefits were gradually extended to others—children not at all dependent upon charity. The character, the spirit, and the purpose of the Society remained, however, unchanged. It sought to give elementary instruction and moral training to children who would otherwise have been more or less neglected in these respects. The benefits of a corresponding plan of education were conferred upon the people of the State at large by the law of 1812, which established a common-school system of a somewhat rudimentary nature ; but the city of New York remained without provision by law for public education until the year 1842, when the Legislature passed an act extending to the city a participation in the system which prevailed in the State. But the act not only did this, it placed the schools of the Public-School Society, with those of the Orphan Asylum, of the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum, and of several other benevolent societies, under the jurisdiction and supervision of the Board of Education. Finding themselves in this position, the incorporators of the Public-School Society transferred their schoolhouses, and all their other property, with their rights, to the Board of Education, and the Society ceased to exist. It was not

long before other school societies followed their example. This event was a public calamity—a calamity not only to the city of New York, but to the State; not only to the State, but to the whole country. Nor has the blight of its effect upon morals, upon politics, and upon education been confined to the country in which it first was felt. At that time our present public-school system may be properly said to have begun its rapid formation. From that time public education passed rapidly into municipal politics, and became an engine at once of political corruption and social deterioration. The example of New York was widely followed, actually if not avowedly. On all sides there was a cry for higher education; and as higher education meant more teachers to be appointed and paid, more schoolhouses to be built, more text-books to be bought by the tens of thousands, and, in brief, more money to be expended, the local politicians, who with anthropomorphic devotion worshiped their own glorified and gigantic likeness in the Hon. William Tweed, did all in their power—and their power was great—to foster the higher education. Admirable, far-seeing, large-minded, philanthropic statesmen! They fostered the higher education until, as I was told about ten years ago by a publisher of school-books, there was no department of his trade so profitable as that in which he was chiefly interested, but that to “introduce” a set of two or three text-books into public-school use cost between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand dollars (for what, pray let us know, O philanthropic dispensers of the healing light of education?); and until now there is a College of the City of New York, as a part of its common-school system, and a Normal School, at which fifteen hundred young women are instructed yearly in the mysteries of teaching, which but a very few of the fifteen hundred practice, mean to practice, or have the opportunity to practice; and until the sum of \$3,805,000 is spent upon public education by the city of New York alone, of which sum no less than \$1,009,207 is paid to teachers of primary departments.*

And such, in a great measure, has the “American” system of public education become in all the country lying north of the Potomac and the Ohio.

Nearly four million dollars taken in one year from the pockets of tax-payers of one city for education—more than a million

* These figures are from the “Report of the President of the New York Board of Education” for 1879.

dollars paid to teachers of primary schools, and a similar expenditure throughout the State and in more than half the States ; and what is the result ? According to independent and competent evidence from all quarters, the mass of the pupils of these public schools are unable to read intelligently, to spell correctly, to write legibly, to describe understandingly the geography of their own country, or to do anything that reasonably well-educated children should do with ease. They can not write a simple letter ; they can not do readily and with quick comprehension a simple "sum" in practical arithmetic ; they can not tell the meaning of any but the commonest of the words that they read and spell so ill. There should not be need to say that many of them—many in actual numbers—can do all these things fairly well ; but these many are few indeed in proportion to the millions who receive a public-school education. They can give rules glibly ; they can recite from memory ; they have some dry, disjointed knowledge of various ologies and osophies ; they can, some of them, read a little French or German with a very bad accent ; but as to such elementary education as is alike the foundation of all real higher education and the *sine qua non* of successful life in this age, they are, most of them, in almost as helpless and barren a condition of mind as if they had never crossed the threshold of a schoolhouse.

The testimony to this amazing and deplorable condition of the mass of the pupils of our public schools is so varied, so independent, and comes from so many quarters that it must be true ; it can not be disregarded. It is given by private persons, by officers of school districts, by teachers themselves ; and it comes from all parts of the country. It can not be repeated here in detail, for it would fill half the pages that can be afforded to this article. But one example of it may be given, which fairly represents the whole. Mr. George A. Walton, agent of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, in a report on the public schools of Norfolk County, Massachusetts, a county which borders upon Boston, and the inhabitants of which are somewhat exceptional in wealth and intelligence, sets forth a condition of things which has thus been graphically but correctly summarized by the Chicago "Times" :

The examinations were, in the first place, of the simplest and most practical character. There was no nonsense about them. They had but one object—to see if, in the common schools, the children were taught to read, write, and cipher. . . . The showing made by some of the towns was excellent, and of them we shall speak presently. In the case of others, and of

many others, it is evident from what Mr. Walton says, and still more evident from what he intimates, that the scholars of fourteen years of age did not know how to read, to write, or to cipher. They could, it is true, repeat the pieces in their school readers, and parse and spell in classes, and rattle off rules in grammar and arithmetic, not one word of which they understood; but if they were called upon to write the shortest of letters or the simplest of compositions, or to go through the plainest of arithmetical combinations, their failure was complete. They had, in fact, been taught what to them were conundrums without end; but the idea that the teaching was to be of any practical use in the lives of these children, when they grew to be American men and women, formed no part of the system, and evidently had never entered into the heads of the instructors. . . . Then, when the letters and compositions were brought in, the ingenuity in bad spelling seems simply incredible. Unless the different misspellings of the word "scholar," for instance, were given, as in this volume they are, who would believe that they would be some two hundred and thirty in number? Then, again, sixty-five different spellings are enumerated of the word "dépôt"; one hundred and eight of the common word "whose," and fifty-eight of "which." Out of eleven hundred and twenty-two pupils who used the adverb "too" in the narratives, eight hundred and fifty-nine, or nearly seventy-seven per cent. of the whole, spelled the word incorrectly. Then on pages 218, 219, and 246-248 of the report we are given *fac-simile* lithographs of these letters and compositions, showing their average excellence in certain of the towns, and anything worse it would be hard to conceive. Language fails to do justice to them; they only can do it to themselves.*

This is the intellectual result of the operation of our much-vaunted "American" public-school system during the last thirty or forty years. Competent observers in all quarters tell the same story. In the year 1875 it was officially recorded that the candidates for cadetship at West Point had shown a steady deterioration in thoroughness of elementary knowledge during the then last twenty-five years. It is needless to waste more words in setting forth a fact equally sad, disgraceful, and undeniable.

Nor need we look very far for information which is both corrob-

* Mr. Walton's report is before me, and I am able to bear unqualified testimony to the unexaggerated truthfulness of this summary setting forth of the case which he presents in great detail. I have quoted this passage less for convenience' sake than that the reader might see how widely a judgment against the efficiency of our public schools is beginning to be diffused. Mr. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., in his paper on "The New Departure in the Common Schools of Quincy," says of an examination of those schools by competent and impartial gentlemen in 1873: "The result was deplorable. The schools went to pieces. . . . In other words, it appeared, as the result of eight years' school-teaching, that the children, as a whole, could neither write with facility nor read fluently."

orative and explanatory of this lamentable and almost ridiculous failure of public-school education. The system soon began to bring forth its proper fruits. The Superintendent of Public Instruction in the State of New York, in the eighth annual report from his office, presented to the Assembly in 1862, after discussing in general terms the "limited knowledge" among a "large proportion" of the teachers of "that which all teachers ought first to know," a deficiency which had been found a "source of embarrassment," said :

Many [teachers] who have been over a very extended ground of higher mathematics fail utterly in the simplest principles of mental and practical arithmetic. More have spent busy terms in the study of the classics, but have no knowledge of the first principles of their own language; while to find one who knows anything of the geography of his own, much less of foreign lands, is rare good fortune indeed! And yet these are not novices, but representative teachers, as the average term of their experience shows (p. 39).

We have here revealed to us the condition into which public education had been brought by twenty years' experience of our public-school system—a period just about long enough to mature a second generation of teachers under the influence of that system.

This being the mental condition and the educational equipment of teachers, what may we reasonably look for in their pupils—the time having not yet come when men may gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles? Mr. Walton's Norfolk County report might have been written in advance by any man gifted with moderate power of forecast. As a mere impartor of useful knowledge the public-school system has failed utterly.

And now let us consider that system in relation to the reason, the only reason, which justifies its establishment. It is supported by enormous sums of money taken by process of law from the pockets of individuals. Will he, nill he, every man who has property is compelled to pay for the education of other men's children in schools to which he may or may not wish to send his own children, if he has any. The only possible justification for this forcible appropriation of his money is, that it is for the public good, for the common wealth, that the system for the support of which his money is taken affords security for life, liberty, and property which without that system would be lacking. And this is the reason for it, and the only reason that is avowed. It has recently been set forth very clearly by an able and highly esteemed public-school officer, of high position, in a passage which is a very complete expression

of the *raison d'être* of our public-school system. The Superintendent of the Board of Education of the city of New York (one of the most high-minded and capable members that board has ever had), in his report for 1879, thus remarks :

In our day, and in the condition of American life, we need all the power of an educated intelligence in order to lift the masses, as well as to maintain an equilibrium in the forces of society. The distribution of knowledge is as necessary as the distribution of light. We need the distributive power of systems of education which will reach the lowest abodes and penetrate to the farthestmost hamlets of the land. The best education of the people will thus become the best government of the people (p. 27).

Here we have the professed, and the honestly believed social and political theory upon which the public-school system rests. It is to lift the masses. Knowledge is as necessary to healthy social life as light is to healthy physical life. If education reaches the lowest abodes, we may then, and only then, have the best government of the people.

The theory is not merely unsound, it is utterly and absolutely false. Knowledge will not lift the masses, except as a balloon is lifted, because it is inflated with gas. Mere knowledge does not raise the quality of men's moral natures. Knowledge is light indeed to him who can see, and who can think and feel rightly as to what he sees ; but mere intellectual light, without moral warmth, will not produce a healthy social life, any more than a healthy physical life can exist in the light of a thousand suns without the genial warmth of one. The road to the best government of the people does not lie only through the door of the public schoolhouse.

This theory itself, however, is the natural fruit of a belief which has obtained general acceptance, and which is embodied in an adage that, like so many adages, is fallacious, and yet is received without question because of its sententious form. It seems conclusive, and it saves people the trouble of observing and of thinking. This adage is, "Ignorance is the mother of vice." Among all the hundreds of adages, which are supinely accepted and blindly acted upon, there is hardly one which is more at variance than this is with the truth. On the contrary, the teaching of the world's experience through all past ages, and in the light of the present day, is this :

Ignorance is the mother of superstition, but has no relation with vice.

Ignorance has, indeed, a certain relation with vice—a relation which, however, is merely one of frequent coexistence. But coex-

istence does not imply connection. It no more implies connection than sequence does. That which follows is not necessarily the consequence of that which goes before. *Post hoc* does not imply *propter hoc*. Equally true is it that two things found often, or even generally, together have not necessarily the relation of cause and effect, nor even that of identity of cause. Vice may, and often does, flaunt unpalliated by ignorance; ignorance may, and often does, walk with its humble purity untainted by vice. Some of the most vicious men that have ever lived have been well instructed, accomplished, and even learned. Some of the purest and best have been ignorant—so ignorant that they could read and write hardly better than the majority of the pupils of our public schools. Ignorance and vice are so frequently found together, not because the former is the cause of the latter, but because both—but chiefly the former—are the common companions of poverty. Want, if not the parent of vice, is at least its faithful foster-mother. One among the proverbs that really embody the truth of the world's experience is that which tells us, "It is hard for an empty bag to stand upright." Becky Sharp said that she could have been a good woman if she had had five thousand pounds a year. The goodness of the Becky Sharps of this world, under any circumstances, is but skin-deep, like their beauty; but beauty is none the less sought for and longed for; and so decorous behavior and decent life are all that society can demand, no matter what their motive. Thackeray, in this speech of his greatest creation, lays bare the nature of all vice. Vice is the satisfaction of personal wants without regard to right. Now, as the obstacle to the satisfaction of wants is almost always the lack of means, that is of money or its equivalent, the result is that most vice is directly connected with the need of money. The fact that the need may be actual and healthy—as for the necessities and comforts of life, or fictitious and fanciful—as for luxuries of whatever sort, does not impair the truth of the axiom that need is the motive to the vicious life. Hence it is that poverty and vice are so often found together, and that, poverty being so common, vice is so common. There are thousands of humble Becky Sharps, and of their male counterparts, in every town and county in the country.

If ignorance were the mother of vice, and if our public-school system were what it is set up to be, the fruits of the latter would by this time have been manifest, plainly visible to the whole world, in our moral advancement as a people, in a higher tone in our society, in the greater purity of our politics and the incorruptibility of our

legislators, in the increased probity of the executive officers of our State and municipal governments and of our corporate financial bodies, in the superior wisdom and more solid integrity of our bench, in the sobriety of our matrons, the modesty of our maidens, in the greater faithfulness of wives, in the diminution of divorces, in the steady decrease of vice and crime and idleness and vagrancy and vagabondage. If ignorance be the mother of vice, and the public school is the efficient foe of ignorance, the last fifty years should have seen in all these respects an improvement so great that admiring nations would applaud and humbly hope to imitate. But who needs to be told that in all these respects we have deteriorated? It is not Horace's praiser of the days when he was a boy that tells us this. It is a matter of public record. It is known to every observant man who has lived more than thirty years. Our large towns swarm with idle, vicious lads and young men who have no visible means of support. Our rural districts are infested with tramps—a creature unknown to our fathers, and even to us in our youth. The corruption of our legislative bodies is so wide and so deep and so well known that great corporations and business men of large wealth can almost always obtain the legislation needful for their ends, right or wrong. Bribery at elections is almost openly practiced by both our great political parties. The general tone and character of our bench, both for learning, for wisdom, and for integrity, have fallen notably during the last thirty years. Dishonesty in business and betrayal of trust have become so common, that the public record of the last fifteen years on this subject is such that it can not be remembered without shame. Politics, instead of being purified and elevated, has become a trade in which success falls year by year more to inferior men who have a little low cunning. Divorces have multiplied until they have become so common as to be a stock jest in the facetious column of our newspapers. Crime and vice have increased year after year almost *pari passu* with the development of the public-school system, which, instead of lifting the masses, has given us in their place a nondescript and hybrid class, unfit for professional or mercantile life, unwilling and also unable to be farmers or artisans, so that gradually our skilled labor is done more by immigrant foreigners, while our native citizens, who would otherwise naturally fill this respectable and comfortable position in society, seek to make their living by their wits—honestly if they can; if not, more or less dishonestly; or, failing thus, by petty office-seeking. Filial respect and parental love have both

diminished ; and, as for the modesty of our young men, and even of our young women, they do not even blush that they have lost it. This is the condition in which we are after more than half a century of experience of our public-school system, the only justification for whose existence is that it was asserted and believed to be a panacea for the cure of social and political disease. Nor is the case of that system at all bettered by the quite untenable assumption that all this would have been without its influence ; for its only justification, the very reason of its being, is the other assumption, that by it all this would have been prevented.

Moreover, there is evidence on record, evidence furnished quite independently of any investigation of this subject, which proves the case against the public-school system as clearly and as undeniably as the truth of Newton's theory of gravitation is proved by the calculations which enable astronomers to declare the motions and to weigh the substance of the planets. For the census returns show that crime, immorality, and insanity are greater in proportion to population in those communities which have been long under the influence of the public-school system than they are in those which have been without it. The system, be it remembered, is of New England origin, and the New England States have been longest under its influence. The States south of the Potomac are those which were longest without it ; and, indeed, in them it has hardly yet obtained favor or foothold. Let us compare the statistics of population, of literacy and illiteracy, and of crime in these two classes of States, carefully eliminating from our calculation the influence of foreign immigration upon the criminal record of the Northern States, which the particularity of the census returns enables us to do. The comparison is between the native white populations of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, and Rhode Island on the one hand, and the same population of Delaware, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia on the other. These are all original States of the Union, Maine excepted ; but Maine was always a part of New England. They are commonwealths founded at about the same time, by people of the same race and the same religion. In 1860 secession and consequent civil war caused in the Southern States an upturning of all the elements of society, which makes it proper that the examination of their social condition should be limited by the census of that year.

The census of 1860 shows that the New England States had a

native white population 2,665,945 in number, and of these there were but 8,543 adults who could not read and write. The six Southern States mentioned above had 3,181,969 native white inhabitants, among whom there were 262,802 adults who could not read and write. In the New England States, therefore, the native whites who could not read and write were in the proportion of one to 312, while in the six Southern States the proportion of wholly illiterate whites was one to 12. Now, if ignorance is the mother of vice, of crime, of wretchedness, and of all that goes to make bad citizens, the excess of the criminal classes in the Southern States should have been in something like the proportion of 312 to 12. But it was not so. On the contrary, the proportional excess of crime, of pauperism, of suicide, and of insanity (and among the native white inhabitants, be it remembered) was very much greater in the New England States; for in 1860 they had in their prisons 2,459 criminals, while the six Southern States had but 477. New England society, formed under the public-school system, produced one native white criminal to every 1,084 inhabitants; while the Southern States, which had been almost entirely without that system, produced only one to every 6,670—a disproportion of more than six to one! * The New England States had one publicly supported pauper to every 178 inhabitants, while the six Southern, which were without public schools, had but one to every 345. Of suicides, there were in the New England States one to every 13,285 of the entire population; but the others had only one to every 56,584. The census of 1860 has no record of insanity; but that of 1870 shows in New England one insane person of those born and living in the several States to every 800 native-born inhabitants; but in the six Southern States in question only one to every 1,682 native inhabitants. Strange to say, foremost in this sad record stand Massachusetts and Connecticut, which have had common schools since 1647 and 1650 respectively, as was remarked in the beginning of this article; the former pro-

* The well-known fact that homicide is more common in the Southern States than in the Northern is of no importance in the consideration of these statistics. It merely shows that to the mass of crime in the one case homicide bears a large proportion, and to the mass of crime in the other a very small one. And it is to be remarked that of the homicides in the Southern States a very large proportion, springing as they do from an antiquated perversion of the sense of honor, semi-savage as they often are, are generally less base and vicious in motive than the comparatively few murders in the Northern.

ducing one native white criminal to every 649 native white inhabitants ; the latter, one to every 845.*

The significance of these facts and figures can not be mistaken or explained away. Does it therefore follow that knowledge is incompatible with virtue, thrift, good citizenship, and happiness, and that education is *per se* an evil? Not at all. But it does follow that ignorance is not the mother of vice ; that ignorance has no necessary connection with vice. It does follow that the public-school system is not the reformatory agent which it has honestly been supposed to be ; that its influence is not to make men good and thrifty and happy ; that it is not adapted to produce the best government of the people.

In 1870 the cost of the system which coexisted with the condition of society indicated by these figures, and which has been previously described in this article, was more than *sixty-four million dollars!*

The remedy? A remedy must be found. It can not be set forth in detail at the end of an article like this, which has already exceeded the limits assigned to it. But it may be briefly indicated as a discontinuation of any other education at the public cost than that which is strictly elementary—reading, spelling, writing, and the common rules of practical arithmetic ; and in the remission of all education higher than this to parents, the natural guardians and earthly providence of their children. And those children only should be thus educated at public cost whose parents are too poor to give them even an elementary education themselves. Supplementary to this simple system of elementary education, there might be some jealously guarded provision for the higher education of pupils who have exceptional ability and show special aptitude and taste for science or literature.

Moreover, if Government is to assume a parental and formative function, and to attempt the making of good citizens, it may with much more reason and propriety establish public farms and public workshops, and train in them its future citizens to get their own

* My attention was directed to these facts by a pamphlet on the system of anti-parental education, by the Hon. Zachary Montgomery, of California, which I received on the 23d of October last, after the publication of my articles on the public schools, in the "New York Times." Mr. Montgomery's trenchant pamphlet contains very elaborate tables made up from the United States census reports. I have verified them by those reports, and find them essentially accurate and trustworthy.

living honestly and respectably, than it may establish and compel attendance upon schools on a system the result of which, according to the experience of half a century, is deterioration in purity of morals, in decency of life, in thrift, and in all that goes to make good citizens, accompanied by a steadily increasing failure in the acquirement of the very elements of useful knowledge.

RICHARD GRANT WHITE.